

Carol Rhodes and Andrew Mummery in conversation

AM In the 1990s you were part of an emerging cultural scene in Glasgow. You were a committee member of the newly established artist-led space *Transmission* and were involved in women's politics and the *Glasgow Free University*. What was important to you about the cultural and political climate of those years and to what extent did it influence the paintings that you went on to make?

CR That makes me sound like I was a very purposeful person. But I should say I was very dreamy, too, and in another world a lot of the time. But yes, I did do all those things, and I stopped painting for a few years during these activities. From well before that, in my circles, everything was referred back to politics. It included how we lived – even small things mattered, and personal things. However, the influence of politics on the work itself was and is indirect. In a way the paintings are always going to be somehow wider than specific political concerns, no matter how far reaching those are. In the work of artists I admire, ideology is mostly embedded in the paintings. For example Stubbs or Chardin may appear conservative, but the way they depict the world and its complexities does something different, even opposite, from just reflecting the context of their society and their patrons.

I have spoken before of how conscious I am of giving everything a sort of equal status in the pictures, which is enabled by the aerial view, seeing the landscape top to bottom, not near and far. Front doesn't have priority over middle-ground, middle-ground over background; it's sort of spatially egalitarian. Also being interested and excited by the backs of buildings and places, not the fronts. All these things may sound slight in themselves, or 'merely' formal, but they're all part of what makes a painting and gives it meaning and power.

In the 1990s in Glasgow (and more widely) conceptualism was dominant and painting had a low status. It was generally considered that conceptual thought didn't have a part in painting, and that it was emptily aesthetic. Painting was disregarded, and weirdly at the same time romanticised. So to be a painter during this period – trying to make paintings that were relevant – was in itself a statement of some kind.

AM Your paintings have been described as encounters between nature and human settlement; as lying between fiction and documentary – somewhere on the edge of recognition; as 'edgelands'. What would you say to someone looking at your paintings for the first time to help them think about what they are seeing?

CR A part of it's to do with balance. I don't mean harmony – but everything in a painting is to do with balance, especially the edge between the painting working and not quite working. Encounters between natural and human are one of the balances of the painting. If a forest or the sea is given a straight edge, there's a particular tension between controlled and uncontrolled. Parts of the paintings have humour, too. If you put something big next to something very small, or if a path takes a certain unexpected turn, I do find that funny.

About ‘edgelands’, Tom Lubbock wrote well about that in his essay in the catalogue of my Edinburgh show (*Carol Rhodes*, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh, 2007). Marion Shoard’s book *Edgelands* is relevant, and people have talked about surveillance, dystopia, ecology, psycho-geography, non-places. Any of these might give an interesting take, even if they are not necessarily a direction I had intended. The subject matter opens the work up to those interpretations, and if the painting works then those readings might be part of it, but on their own they’re not the point, and don’t necessarily make for an interesting painting.

I love my subject matter, both for itself and for what it lets me do in the paintings. I’m very interested in what makes compositions (I said this in comments I made for a recent exhibition). Composition is not just a formal thing – it affects the whole meaning and psychology of the work. For example, the buildings in *Two Buildings* [p. 166] could have exactly the same tone, colour, weight and shape as they do, but if they were turned away from each other it would be a very different painting. The painting has the structure of an ‘X’, which would usually be too explosive for me to work with. But in this case the axis made up by the buildings is closed down by having the two buildings facing each other, turned inwards.

AM *What for you is the function of the drawings and how do they make the paintings possible?*

CR When I first went to art school I just caught the end of that teaching of ‘how to make a painting’ from sketches and studies and colour notes etc. , when that was mostly already an affectation. So all that fetishisation of the artist’s process makes me queasy. But yes, the drawings are cartoons for painting – entirely functional. I work out through them how to put together things from different photographic sources. Sometimes I’ve been able to use just one image of an existing place, though some elements may have to change as I work. The lines of the finished drawing are then traced onto the primed board for the painting. The painting sometimes can diverge from the drawing, and I might go back to the drawing to work out the changes. (That’s why a lot of them have different colour lines, to let me know which part to retrace.)

For years I didn’t see them as having value beyond their use as a tool for the painting. I kept all the drawings in a plans-chest drawer and didn’t show them to anyone. I can’t remember how I came to see them differently. It’s so interesting that that can happen – you can recognise something as art. It took a few people to see them and say ‘hang on, these are interesting’, for me to look at them more objectively. But some of them work in their own right and some don’t. It’s not the Duchamp thing of ‘I say this is Art’ and it becomes art.

Many different aspects have to combine to make a drawing come together. Looking at so many pictures (photos, plates in books) and keeping them all in mind, being super intuitive while having to be very practical. Starting a new drawing is a delight, it means anything is possible and in a way it’s very simple – just pencil and an eraser. But then there’s a massive mental juggling process. It is very difficult to do.

AM You have written that your paintings are a reaction to things seen in the world. The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty raised the question of how it was possible for a human being to be thoroughly in – and of – the world, and yet stand apart from it in such a way as to see it, describe it and refer to it in language, to paint it. What would your answer be?

CR When you notice something, really notice it, you're inside it and outside it at the same time, aren't you. It's a paradox. Distance needn't mean you're detached. Although the paintings are of things that are far away, each item I imagine very close up, even its smell and texture, whether grass for example is damp or dry, whether soil is sandy or clay, or how deep some water is. Even though the photographs give a kind of double separation – because I'm looking at the photo and the photo is 'looking at' the subject – I aim to pass through these separations to reach the stuff itself. At the same time I have to be objective and subjective about the photo, to select what I need from it.

Above a certain height, when things become pattern, I can't use them. It may be to do with understanding the space. Some of the paintings may take a while to understand spatially, but you can always get a bearing. Even in the more extreme ones, such as *Forest, Road or Sea and Land* [p. 22], the information is there to relate to oneself – to the human. I very much liked what you said in the video you did for the Belfast show recently; you said, as much as looking down at the world in my work, 'we're actually looking at our own relationship to the spaces around us'. That's a very complicated thing to say.

I have Merleau-Ponty's 'Eye and Mind' essay in one of my dad's philosophy books, but I've never read it. But there's an interesting essay on it by an American philosopher, Marjorie Grene. ('The Aesthetic Dialogue of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty', in *The Debate Between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois, 1998.) She talks about his stressing that the artist – the painter's actual body – is implicitly present in the representation. Rather than, or despite, being detached by perception from what I see, my 'being is fused with distant objects', she says. She talks about presence-in-absence and humans 'making a home' in the world through perception. All that resonates with me – distance-yet-detail, finding beauty in deserted and apparently alienating places. It also relates to something I've said (which can be easily misinterpreted), that my works are all self portraits.

And for Merleau-Ponty, apparently, when we see part of a thing, we see all of it. Human perception is not really a fixed perspectival view, showing us one face of a thing. Seeing is knowing, and it's multi-sensory. There's a lot that could be related to my work.

AM In 'Cézanne's Doubt', Merleau-Ponty says, 'If Cézanne's life seems to us to carry the seeds of his work within it, it is because we get to know his work first and see the circumstances of his life through it, charging them with a meaning borrowed from that work... His life was the preliminary project for his future work. The work to come is hinted at, but it would be wrong to take these hints for causes, although they do make a single adventure of his life and work'. I wonder if that relates to this idea of the work as self portrait?

CR That's more a general question about how artists' life experiences affect their work, and should or shouldn't be read biographically. (I think Lynda Morris is tackling some of that in her essay in this book.) But I was saying something else when I talked about my paintings being kinds of self portrait. It is maybe more to do with other things Merleau-Ponty talks about, like his stress on the artist – the painter's actual body – being implicit in the representation; also ideas about how artists exercise relative, dialectical freedom, always within the terms and limitations of art.

AM I'd like to ask you about colour. It seems to me crucial to the particularity of your paintings, but has not been addressed in any detail by those who have written about your work in the past. You have talked about, as influences, your childhood in India, medieval and early renaissance painting, science fiction, and the train journey between Edinburgh and Glasgow. It's an eclectic mix and I am wondering if one way of making sense of it is to think about colour?

CR I never thought about that, but I can't over stress how important colour is. Sometimes a painting will start from the idea of a colour.

I do like that oil paints are made up of stuff in the world – minerals, organic matter, etc. Some tubes are dense and heavy, and other tubes weigh hardly anything. Some are gritty and weak, and other ones are slimy and powerful. I'm a bit of a nerd about all that.

I mainly work in terms of local colours. A building, say, will often be the same colour and tone on both sides – it needn't be affected by light and shadow or what's around it. And, I never thought this out properly before, but I realise when I choose a colour for something, it's as if there's a colour that I believe it 'is', but then I might make it a colour somehow to the side of that. It makes the whole thing more complicated, which makes up for leaving out a lot of other information.

I'll have a lot of books in the studio, open at images that I've chosen in relation to what I'm working on. Some will be art books (mostly for courage), and some might be aerial photography or geology or geography books. A lot of those images will be chosen for a colour or resonance or the sum of colours and tones, that I think I can use for a current painting. Some get used and in the end some don't. I have one book that I often put out, hopefully, at a certain plate – a semi-precious stone that's such a dark red it looks like a black. The only clue is a very few tiny glints of red. I only recently realised why I've never been able to use it; it could only ever describe a gem stone – it's not easily transferrable. (I'd always put it out, just in case.)

Although I have many many books, I can usually go from memory straight to the book that has an image I need, because I'll remember its paper and print quality. That's as important as anything, and integral to the image. For example, a children's encyclopaedia printed in the 1970s can have thick, absorbent paper with a print technique of litho colour separations, and often certain colours have bleached out. One has to be careful not to be seduced by that kind of beauty, but to be disciplined and focused on what's needed.

AM *Tom Lubbock, in a review of your work, commented, that painting is '...thriving, burgeoning and free to be what it jolly well likes: abstract, figurative, decorative, photographic, typographic, cartoony, hand-made, machine-made, surreal, minimal, packed with quotations from Old Masters, meticulously copied from postcards, and painted with any instrument and on any surface you please'. Is this a good thing?*

CR The 1980s was the last time there was a dominant trend – big neo-expressionist or ‘New Image’ painting. Obviously there are problems both with dominant trends and with ‘anything goes’. The *Forever Now* show at MoMA a couple of years ago was a celebration of the current freedom of painting to be supposedly whatever it likes, and the ability to sample from the whole of the past of painting. It should have been a great celebration of that, but on the whole it felt flat. But what Tom Lubbock went on to say in that review is that in fact there’s still something painting is ‘not allowed’ to be, and that is to have real difficultness. Really, we *are* seeing another dominant trend; it seems like freedom to do anything, but only anything that can be recognised as part of the ‘anything goes’ ethos.

However, this is still better. When there were obvious current styles, like minimal colour field painting for example, it could be hard for an artist outside that to get taken seriously – a figurative artist like Sylvia Sleigh, say, has only recently become recognised. Something that always amazes me, though, is that painting is just someone making smears on a surface, but someone else can look at that and read it, and know if it stands up or not, if it’s interesting, and whether the artist is taking risks. And that seems to be true across different types of painting, and from different places and times.

The artist's studio, 2018

